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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001088

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MIXED REACTIONS TO LA CELLE-ST. CLOUD
CONFERENCE

REF: A. BEIRUT 1082

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1047

[1](#)C. PARIS 3062

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Lebanese participants in the July 14-15 La Celle-St. Cloud talks told Embassy that the talks succeeded in breaking the ice among Lebanon's feuding political parties, who had not sat down together as a group since the spring 2006 national dialogue. Herded together in a two-star, unairconditioned motel outside of Paris, the delegates, guided by the French, avoided hot topics such as Hizballah's disarmament. The parties are now positioning themselves for the next rounds of events: French Special Envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran's July 23 and Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's July 28 visits to Beirut. End summary.

CONFERENCE SUCCEEDS IN BREAKING THE ICE

[1](#)2. (C) Below are reactions by some of the Lebanese who participated in the French government-sponsored conference on Lebanon outside of Paris July 14-15:

-- Senior PM Advisor Mohamad Chatah, who attended on behalf of Prime Minister Siniora, told the Ambassador July 17 that, apart from a few "minor skirmishes," the conference was better than expected, with the parties actually talking and listening to each other for the first time since last year's national dialogue.

-- MP Ibrahim Kanaan, representing Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun, termed the conference "excellent" (and credited his own diplomatic efforts for its success).

-- Ali Hamdan, representing Amal leader Nabih Berri, part of the March 8 opposition, said the meeting was a success in that it "broke the ice" between all parties. The discussions were open and frank, he said, and he welcomed the call by Telecom Minister Marwan Hamadeh of the governing March 14 coalition for calming the atmosphere in the country. Hamdan also noted that the French are alarmed by the tension in Lebanon and are afraid of a new civil war. He related a French statement that, "We should all work to have a safe corridor to reach the presidential election with a positive

attitude instead of entering into a dark tunnel."

-- Hamadeh, who represented Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader Walid Jumblatt, told the Ambassador July 15 he viewed the talks as "mildly positive."

-- Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Elias Murr told the Ambassador July 15 that his sister, who represented their father Michel Murr at St. Cloud, described the talks as a waste of time. (Comment. We suspect the negative reaction is due to the fact that Michel Murr's two-year interim presidency idea reportedly was widely panned in St. Cloud, though it since appears to have been resurrected since (to be reported septel). End comment.)

-- Elie Khoury, an advisor to Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea who did not attend the talks but had spoken with Joseph Nehmeh, who did, also was pessimistic. Khoury told Pol/Econ Chief July 19 they did not even merit a "five out of ten." Conceding that the talks were a positive achievement in the short-term by bringing people together, he grimly added that the long-term results remain to be seen.

-- MP Hagop Pakraduni, representing the Armenian party at the conference, told polstaff that he did see any movement in Paris. While the meeting "broke the ice" between all parties, each party is still holding on to its previous position, he said.

CLOUD OVER ST. CLOUD

13. (C) According to several of the representatives we spoke

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with, the talks nearly derailed early on when Kouchner spoke of the need for a security truce and an end to political assassinations -- interpreted by the astonished participants as an implicit accusation against Hizballah. According to Kanaan, MP Akram Shuahyyeb (Jumblatt bloc) seized on Kouchner's faux pas to lash out at Hizballah, prompting Hizballah delegate Nawwaf Moussawi to respond in kind. Kouchner promptly called for a pause cafe.

HIZBALLAH BEHAVES, BUT ARMS NOT CHALLENGED

14. (C) Chatah said the conference steered clear of hot issues such as Hizballah arms. According to Hamadeh, it was clear the Hizballah and Amal representatives were under strict orders "not to torpedo the talks," but also not to give anything significant. For example, they refused to reaffirm support for Siniora's seven points (which both parties backed a year ago), refused to discuss UNSC resolutions, and refused to discuss the four points of agreement from the spring 2006 national dialogue.

SPLINTERS WITHIN MARCH 14...

15. (C) Several of the representatives we met described what they saw as increasing signs of disunity among the March 14 ranks. Hamdan, from opposition March 8, remarked that March 14 is not as firm as in the past, and its arguments are getting weaker and weaker. Pakraduni expressed astonishment at the position of the March 14 Tripoli bloc, headed by Transportation Minister Mohamad Safadi, who said there should be a two-thirds quorum to elect a new president, clearly at odds with March 14's claim that a simple majority is sufficient. Safadi claimed to the DCM on July 18 that his bloc had long held the view that the president should be chosen only with a two-thirds majority of parliament to ensure the widest support possible. They went public with this view now, he said, because of concern there will be a deadlock when parliament meets to select a president beginning September 25, reaching a two-thirds majority will

be impossible, and March 14 will then insist on choosing a president with a simple majority -- a divisive move in Safadi's view. March 8's reaction, Safadi said, was that he had taken a stand for the country that will be useful for addressing the political impasse.

AND WITHIN THE OPPOSITION?

¶6. (C) Hamadeh said it was clear Aoun's representatives (MP Ibrahim Kanaan and Simon Abu Ramia) were "in a different place" than Hizballah and Amal. He expressed cautious optimism about the potential for March 14 talks with the FPM, although he wondered how far such contacts could go given Aoun's desire for the presidency (a concession March 14 is not prepared to give).

¶7. (C) Chatah also said he sensed the FPM was moving away from Hizballah and Amal when Kanaan stressed the need to adhere to the principle of holding presidential elections on time, though he reportedly clung to the need to establish a national unity government as a "safety belt." According to Chatah, Hizballah representative resigned Energy Minister Mohamad Fneish also focused on the national unity government, threatening "in a Fneish-like manner" that without the "umbrella" of unity cabinet based on a one-third plus one seats formula for the opposition, there would be no President.

KENAN'S MIDNIGHT NAVETTE DIPLOMACY

¶8. (C) Describing (and congratulating) himself as a conference mediator MP Ibrahim Kanaan claimed to have successfully brokered an agreement on mutual guarantees: March 8 would not resign from a national unity cabinet, and March 14 would guarantee that the presidential elections will be the gateway to a political solution for Lebanon. This, Kanaan beamed, was the result of his overnight efforts shuttling back and forth between the participants' motel rooms in order to drive consensus.

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¶9. (C) Kanaan further claimed to have held very good discussions on the margins of the meeting with Hamadeh and Chatah, and plans to follow-up in Beirut. He alluded to a possible obstructionist role on the part of Geagea's Lebanese Forces (LF), noting that LF "turns hysterical" whenever they hear talk of an Aoun presidency, which they fear would come at their expense. Nehmeh reportedly told Kanaan that LF leadership is "frightened of Aoun."

NEXT STEPS

¶10. (C) Chatah said French FM Kouchner tried to find common ground in an agreement on the need to renounce violence and on the next steps for continuing the political dialogue, but Hizballah and Amal refused to commit to the latter, citing the need for approval of their political leadership. Hizballah did not oppose future visits by French Special Envoy Cousseran to Lebanon. PM Siniora later opined that this acquiescence was due to French outreach to Iran. March 14, on the other hand, was ready to continue the dialogue in Beirut.

¶11. (C) Cousseran is due in Beirut July 23, with Kouchner following on July 28. Kanaan told us Kouchner will hold separate meetings with party leaders (it is not yet clear whether he will meet with Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah), followed by a reunion of the St. Cloud delegates.

FELTMAN